

Mission to Zila

By Charlene Newcomb; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

The room was dark, lit only by the soft glow of medical equipment. Its hum was the only sound that broke the silence.

Alex felt exhausted. Her body movements seemed sluggish. Her head ached. *How did I get here, she wondered. Where am I?*

There was a movement outside the door. She sensed a familiar presence, as if someone thought about entering the room but was frightened away. Then, another pair of footsteps echoed through the corridor. The door into the room slid open. A sudden stream of light caused her to squint at the figure who approached the bedside. She could just make out the insignia of a captain in the Imperial Navy.

"Alexandra?" he called, his voice so distant.

"Where am I?" she asked, barely able to form the words.

"You're on the *Judicator*."

"What?" Alex looked up into the face standing over the bed. She recognized Captain Brandei.

"Don't you remember what happened?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly.

"Your fighter was hit, then caught in our tractor beam."

My fighter?

"Your father doesn't know he raised a traitor to the Empire."

Father?!

"No!" Alex sat straight up in bed. Her heart pounded as she gasped for air. Her eyes darted around the room. There was no medical equipment, no Captain Brandei. She was in her dorm at the University.

She fell back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. Was it just a dream? *Me? Flying a starfighter? Captured by an Imperial Star Destroyer!*

Could this be a vision of her future? Would the New Republic come to Garos IV? And would she work with them to free this world she called home? That's what she had always lived for --

It's what she might die for --

An alarm buzzed. As sunlight streamed through the window, Alex glanced at the chronometer. 0715. She was supposed to meet her father at Imperial Headquarters in 45 minutes.

* * *

"Good morning, gentlemen," Alex greeted the two officers in General Zakar's reception room.

"Morning, Miss Winger," Lieutenant Nilo said, nodding his head.

Dair Haslip stood up and walked over to Alex. He squeezed her hand gently. "Hello, Alex. I didn't think I'd see you today."

"Father had an early meeting with the general and needed to pick up some reports before we left for Zila. I've only got a minute. Can you walk with me to his office?" she asked him.

Dair threw a glance toward Nilo. "Yeah, I think I can trust him to keep an eye on things."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence, o wise lieutenant!" Nilo kidded him.

Alex led Dair out into the corridor where he delicately slipped his hand out of hers. Proper military protocol. He was genuinely fond of Alex. This "relationship" they'd established as part of their cover with Garos IV's underground was a lot harder for him than he'd ever admit. But he knew how Alex felt. She'd always been honest with him. Friends, she'd said -- just friends.

"When will you be back?"

"Tonight. There's a study group meeting at 2100 that I plan to attend," she told him.

He nodded -- he was planning to be at that meeting of the underground, too. "Well, then, I guess I won't see you until tomorrow," he said, playing along with the conversation for the benefit of those they passed in the corridor.

"Maybe we can have lunch," she suggested, nodding to a group of officers who greeted her.

"Can I hold you to that?"

"Of course," she smiled at him, stifling a yawn.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Just a little tired. I had the strangest dream."

"Maybe you can tell me about it over lunch." He stopped just outside her father's office. "Listen, you be careful out there today -- no crazy stunts."

"Hey! I'm always careful, Lt. Haslip!" she laughed.

He grinned, shaking his head. The door slid open into the Imperial Governor's reception room. The distinguished looking gentleman standing by the desk turned and smiled at the young couple.

"Well, I'm not surprised!" he exclaimed. "I knew exactly where to send the search team."

"Oh, Father!"

"How are you, Governor?" Dair asked, extending his hand. For a 70-year-old man, Tork Winger had a grip as strong as any 30-year-old.

"I'm just fine, Lieutenant. Good to see you again. Why hasn't Alexandra brought you for dinner at the mansion recently?" he chided.

Dair shrugged his shoulders. "You'll have to ask your daughter that, Governor."

"All right. If you two are going to gang up on me, I'm leaving!" Alex groaned.

Winger placed an arm around his daughter's waist, but winked at Dair. "I'll put in a good word for you, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir."

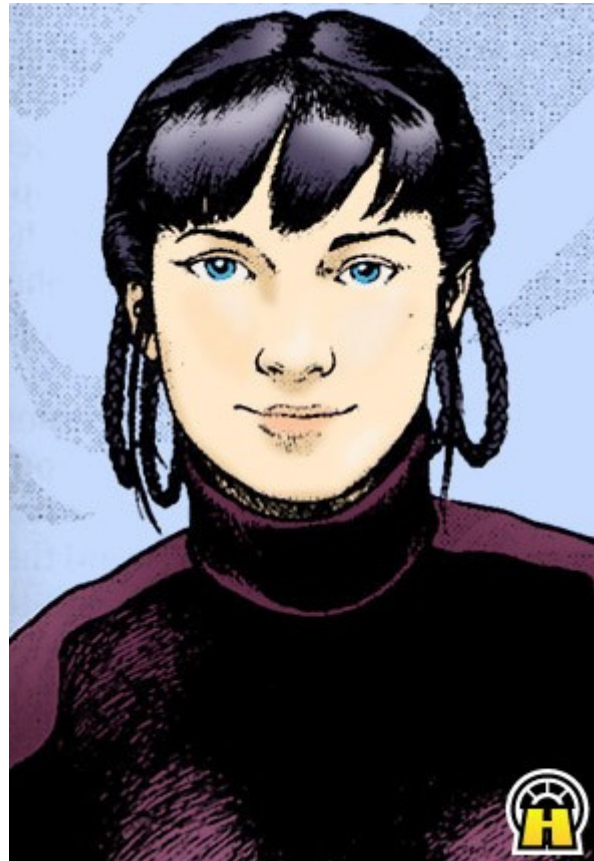
"Shall we go, my dear?"

"Yes, Father." Alex smiled, looped her arm through her father's arm, and led him toward the door.

"Have a good flight, sir."

"Thank you, Haslip."

"See you tomorrow," Alex called to him as the door slid shut behind them.



* * *

Ariana's spaceport was crowded with new arrivals, but the regulars couldn't help noticing one familiar face. Heads turned, faces brightened, and hands waved as Alexandra Winger walked confidently through the corridors. The 20-year-old daughter of Imperial Governor Tork Winger was well known here. She'd been flying since she was 11 -- probably one of the best pilots on Garos IV. And if she wasn't in classes at the University, undoubtedly she could be found deep in discussion with the spaceport techs. Alex knew as much about airspeeders as most of them!

"Good morning, Miss Winger," the flight systems coordinator greeted her as she checked in with the controller's office.

"Good morning, Lt. Vilsics."

"Your airspeeder is prepped and ready to go. Technician Haras worked on the problem you reported. He said you were right about the stabilizer. It's as good as new."

"Good. I'd hate for the governor to have a rough ride this morning," Alex kidded him.

"He couldn't be in better hands," Vilsics replied with a smile.

"Thanks for taking care of it," she called, heading out the door and into the corridor.

Alex hid her emotions behind a smile as she counted at least a dozen ships unloading supplies -- supplies meant for the increasing number of Imperial personnel on Garos IV. Their presence on this world had grown significantly in the last few years.

The underground, which Alex had worked with for nearly four years, managed to dent Imperial operations whenever possible, disrupting supply lines, stealing equipment -- anything to make Imperial lives miserable. But each day brought increasing dangers as the Empire sought to protect its interest in the mines south of the city of Ariana.

"All set?" Governor Winger asked as she entered the docking bay.

"Yes, sir. Lt. Vilsics said the flow rate problem on the systems stabilizer has been fixed. Shouldn't give us any problems today," Alex told him.

"Excellent," her father replied as they strapped themselves into the airspeeder.

Alex guided the craft out of the spaceport. She took off to the west, flying beyond the Tahika Cliffs and out over the Locura Ocean. It had to be one of the most breathtaking views on all of Garos IV. The Cliffs stretched treacherously along the coastline, presenting an ominous obstacle for those few adventurous souls who dared to climb them.

The airspeeder skirted the Cliffs heading south for about a kilometer before Alex moved farther out over the ocean away from the restricted flight zone the Imperials had imposed around the mining center complex. She could fly the route to Zila blindfolded if she had to. It was a trip she made often to visit an old friend, Shana, who also happened to work for the underground.

"It's great that we were able to coordinate our schedules for a change, Father. Your meeting, my visit with Shana."

"Yes, Alexandra. It gives us a chance to talk. I don't see nearly enough of you since you moved on campus," he said. It had been his idea that she move out of the governor's mansion. He worried about her safety after the underground had targeted supply convoys that passed near their home.

"I know, Father," she agreed. "I miss our chats after mealtime, too." It had been a ritual in the Winger household that Alex had participated in since her adoption at the age of six. Countless meals eaten in silence, followed by conversation. She had gained an immeasurable amount of insight, not only into her adoptive father, but also into politics and Imperial activities on Garos IV. Quite useful for an underground operative. "So, tell me Father, what is so important in Zila these days?"

Tork Winger studied his daughter. It never ceased to amaze him that he had raised this child who could talk knowledgeably about any subject from politics to astrophysics and could handle the controls of an airspeeder like she'd been born to it.

"Councillor Baro wants assurance about the Empire's intentions toward his enchanting city," Winger told her.

Alex put on her best incredulous look. "Since when does the Empire need to explain its actions?" *"I can't believe I just said that,"* she thought. *The good Imperial daughter -- agh!*

"Now, now, Alexandra. Diplomacy -- that's the word. A demonstration of the Empire's good will, my dear," he replied quite seriously.

Alex nodded her head, but felt like crying inside. *Good will, indeed,* she thought. *That will be the day!*

"Father, there is speculation at the University that General Zakar will ask for TIE fighter reinforcements to help secure the mining center."

"We have been discussing that possibility. But many of the ships in our Imperial Navy don't have full complements of TIEs." He paused, wondering how much she knew. "I'm sure you've heard the talk about Coruscant."

"It's hard not to notice the additional military personnel here," she said.

"Yes, many of them were evacuated from Coruscant and other worlds in the path of the Rebel onslaught," Winger told her.

She grimaced to herself. "So, the rumors *are* true. The Rebels are within striking distance of the Capital?"

"It may be only a matter of days until Coruscant is in Rebel hands." He shook his head in obvious dismay. He'd visited Imperial City years before and couldn't bear to imagine the destruction.

Alex reached over and gave his hand a comforting touch. She knew what he was thinking. But in her own heart, she welcomed the news that the New Republic was about to take Coruscant -- even if it did mean more Imperials on Garos. Hopefully that situation would be temporary.

Surely the New Republic would head this way. First Coruscant, then Garos IV. One more system slipping from the Empire's ever-weakening grip. "So, you don't think we'll get those TIEs?" she asked.

"Not right away. They can't be spared." He noticed her disappointment. "Why do you ask?"

Alex smiled mischievously. "Well," she said, "I was thinking that I'd love to try flying one!"

"I knew it! Alexandra, what will I do with you?!" he laughed.

"Watch this!" she said gleefully. Alex rolled the airspeeder, peeling off to the east. Second by second its velocity increased. The Tahika Cliffs loomed into view, and the ship dove sharply toward the ocean. With barely meters to spare, Alex pulled up on the controls and the airspeeder glided just above the surface of the water.

The comlink buzzed. "Unidentified ship, you have entered a restricted flight zone. Leave immediately or you will be destroyed," the voice called over the static as an Imperial patrol craft appeared out of nowhere to parallel her airspeeder's course.

"Alexandra!" Winger exclaimed.

"Whoops! Sorry, Father. Guess I went in too close to the mines," she said as she turned the ship toward the southwest to swing around the southernmost part of the continent.

"Open a channel, Alexandra."

She was surprised when he spoke into the comlink.

"This is Imperial Governor Winger," his voice boomed, commanding attention. "To whom am I speaking?"

The voice on the other end of the comlink seemed to hesitate a moment. "This is Lt. Norban, Governor." He paused to clear his throat. "We just received confirmation of your airspeeder's ID, sir."



"That's a little slow, isn't it, Lieutenant?"

Another pause. "Yes, sir."

"Work on that response time, Lieutenant," Winger said, giving Alex a sly wink. She shook her head in disbelief.

"Yes, sir."

"Carry on."

"Thank you, Governor," the voice called as the Imperial airspeeder moved away from theirs.

Tork Winger's face lit up with the biggest grin Alex had ever seen as he clicked the comlink off. She laughed so hard tears came to her eyes.

"Father, I didn't know you could be so devious!"

"Me? Devious? Alexandra, now really!" He sighed, then rummaged through a case filled with datacards, finally pulling one out. "Ah, yes, here it is. I must review this report before we arrive in Zila, my dear."

"All right, Father. I'll let you get your work done."

Alex stared out the cockpit. The Tahika Cliffs had given way to rolling hills as the airspeeder rounded the southern tip of the continent and turned eastward. Beautiful sand-covered beaches were brushed by a gentle blue sea.

But all Alex could think of was the encounter they'd had in the restricted flight zone. The defensive response time had not been that bad -- couldn't have been more than 30 seconds, she figured, plus the few seconds it took them to ID the airspeeder. Of course, 30 seconds was plenty of time for a starfighter to move in on the mining center. Maybe, just maybe, the New Republic *would* be here to put them to the test. *Yes*, she thought. *They will come.*

A vision of a Mon Calamari cruiser filled her mind. She'd had this dream many times -- X-wings in a landing bay preparing for battle. And she was there, sitting in the cockpit of one of those fighters, staring out at stars that formed a dazzling backdrop of diamonds on the black velvet canvas of space. But suddenly, Alex found herself flying in a pitched battle --

"Blue 4, two marks bearing 0----3----0."

"I see them, Blue Leader. I've got the guy on the left."

"Watch it, Blue 4, you picked up a tail!"

A shot blew past the canopy of the X-wing as Alex rolled the fighter sharply to port. Twisting through a half dozen turns, she maneuvered the ship until the TIE dropped in front of her X-wing. Alex locked on target and blasted the TIE into a thousand particles of dust.

Her victory was short-lived. Two shots from starboard rocked the X-wing violently. Then there was darkness --

That dream she'd had last night -- *her* X-wing hit, and captured! Was this really a part of her future?

* * *

Nilo rolled his eyes as he clicked off the comlink with Major General Carner down at the mining center. He'd done more listening than talking while Carner complained about the normal bureaucratic mess-ups that seemed to plague every delivery he asked for. Nilo wondered if he'd ever get used to dealing with the delicate egos of his superior officers.

Dair noticed the exasperated look on Nilo's face when he returned to their office. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Carner wants to know when to expect the supplies the *Tempest* delivered."

It certainly was helpful to have such a talkative office mate. "The *Tempest*? That's a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, isn't it?"

"Right. From Dulathia," Nilo told him. "Our guys got out right before the Rebels overtook the place. She delivered some equipment they managed to salvage for us."

Dair shrugged his shoulders staring blankly off into space.

Nilo shook his head. "Where've you been, Haslip?" Then he noticed that lovelorn look in Dair's eyes. Every time Alexandra Winger stopped in, Haslip's brain seemed to take the rest of the day off. "Never mind!"

"What? Now, what was it you were saying?"

"*Tempest* had to store most of Carner's supplies in Zila."

"Why?" Dair asked.

"Guess they don't want the underground to get to it," Nilo said.

"So, what's being stored in Zila?" he asked.

"Weapons systems."

"What do you mean? Like SP.9s?"

"Think big, Haslip. We're not just talking anti-infantry here." Nilo nodded self-assuredly, his ego inflated by knowledge of the little details of this major shipment. "Only one minor problem." He chuckled softly.

"What's so funny?" Dair asked.

"Seems that when our guys left Dulathia they forgot one vital piece of equipment." He chuckled again. "It's awfully hard to dig a 40-meter hole into a mountain without a plasma drill!"

Dair's eyes grew wide when he realized what Nilo was talking about. A 40-meter hole. A shaft for a reactor?! Good skies! The Empire is putting anti-orbital ion cannon at the mines! He felt sick just thinking about it.

"Hey, Haslip! You okay?"

Dair shook his head. "You know what that means, don't you?" he asked quietly.

"I do," he said, the cockiness gone as a frown wrinkled his brow. The only thing it *could* mean was more protection for the mines in anticipation of a Rebel Alliance assault. "You really think they'll head this way, Haslip?"

Dair swallowed hard, a worried look on his face. "Yeah," he said. *I'm counting on it.* A thousand thoughts raced through his mind as he stared out the window. "I wonder if they'll evacuate us."

Nilo looked at him. "Maybe we won't have to worry about it," he said hopefully. "Maybe that Grand Admiral will bury the Rebels once and for all!"

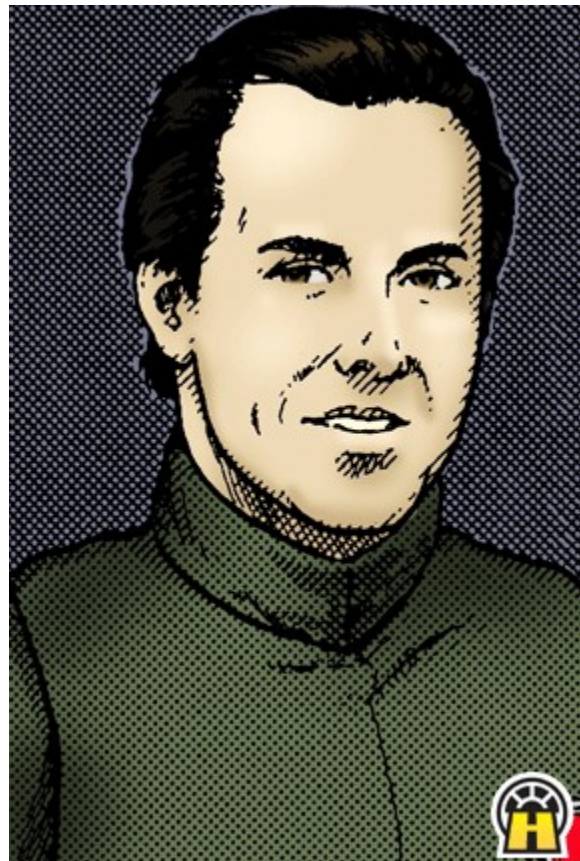
"What Grand Admiral?" Dair asked, a feeling of dread coming over him.

"You *have* been out of it, haven't you?" Nilo kidded him.

"What Grand Admiral?" he insisted in a tone that caught Nilo off guard.

"Calm down, Haslip! Some Grand Admiral has taken command of the fleet. Captain Emba from the *Tempest* told the general that his ship's been called to a rendezvous out in the Borderlands with our old friends from the *Judicator*."

"What else have you heard about this Grand Admiral?" Dair asked.



"Not much," he said shaking his head. "Supposedly he's been working in the Unknown Regions all these years since the Emperor died."

"And he's reorganizing the fleet?"

"Yeah. Emba said this guy's a tactical genius."

"Genius, huh?"

"Those were his exact words. Guess he's planning something big -- that's why the *Judicator* hasn't been here for a while."

For a moment Dair was lost in his own thoughts. Rumors circulated every so often about something big, as Nilo put it. But talk of a Grand Admiral -- this was new. Could this Grand Admiral put the Empire back on the offensive? What would this mean to Garos IV?

"Haslip?"

"What?" Dair asked, vaguely aware of a buzzing coming from somewhere in the room.

"You going to answer that or just let it buzz the rest of the day?" Nilo asked, an amused grin on his face.

"Oh, yeah, right." He cleared his throat and clicked the comlink on.

"General Zakar's office," he paused, listening to the voice on the other end. He couldn't help but smile. Some captain wanted the general to know that Air Defense Systems had nearly shot down Governor Winger's airspeeder. Alex and her crazy stunts!

"Yes, Captain. I'm sure the general will make your apologies to Governor Winger." He paused, shaking his head. "Yes, sir, I'll tell him that. Thank you for your call, sir."

Dair clicked off the comlink and saw that Nilo had been listening in on the conversation. They both had a good laugh over that one while Dair silently thanked the Force that Alex was all right. He couldn't wait to hear her version of the story.

* * *

"Alex!" Shana Turi called, waving to her friend. "On time -- as usual!" she exclaimed.

"You can always count on me! Hello, Shana," Alex greeted her with a hug. "Any problem getting the afternoon off?" she asked.

"No. I just told them I was having lunch with my good friend Alex and her father, our Imperial Governor."

"You name-dropper you" Alex laughed. "C'mon let's go!" she said as they climbed into Shana's landspeeder.

"I didn't expect you for another 10 days. Tell me, is it just a coincidence that you came with your father?"

"Not entirely."

"I didn't think so. To tell you the truth, Alex, I was surprised when I heard he was coming to Zila."

"Imperial business. Which is why I thought I'd tag along," Alex explained. "Father is hoping to pacify the locals. He really didn't go into any details, but what's been happening here since my last visit?"

"Notice anything?" Shana asked as the speeder zipped through downtown Zila.

"Looks like you've got a lot more Imperials in town. Are they just visiting, or do you think they're going to stay for a while?"



"Just sit tight and I think I can answer that question. Check the package in my case."

Alex studied the holos that members of Shana's underground cell had provided. "These were taken at the spaceport?"

Shana nodded. "Late yesterday afternoon."

"Any idea what these modular units are?" she asked, though from her own knowledge of Imperial equipment she could make an intelligent guess. And she didn't like it one bit.

"No. But they've been moved into the mountains."

Who, or what, in Zila does the Empire plan to protect with a planet defender, Alex wondered.

Twenty minutes later, Shana stopped the landspeeder at the top of Mount Berin on the outskirts of Zila. From its crest, the young women could see the ancient city spread out before them. Beyond the old stone turrets that lined Zila's waterfront, the Cabalia Sea was an endless carpet of blue to the horizon.

Shana handed Alex the macrobinoculars. "Check out the view at 0-1-0," she said.

"Whoa!"

High atop a mountain to the east, construction droids were busy setting up an Imperial garrison. Cranes mounted atop the droids hoisted sections of the pre-fab units commonly seen on bases throughout the Empire. Technicians and support personnel scurried around the compound, checking the work in progress.

"Imperial Headquarters, Southern Sector," Shana said.



Alex shook her head. "No wonder Councilor Baro wants reassurance about the Empire's objectives here," Alex commented.

"Look toward the far western edge --"

"What is that?"

"Storage facility. That's where they moved those units."

Alex frowned. *KDY v-150s in storage? How strange,* she thought, as she studied the rest of the compound. "And I see they're building a shuttle landing platform, too. Busy, aren't they?" she said sarcastically.

"Crews have been working on it since late last night," Shana told

her.

"What about security?"

"Two squads of scout troopers, plus a company of stormtroopers."

Alex grimaced to herself and wondered what the Imperials were up to. "Okay. Continue to document all traffic to and from the mountain, all schedules, shift changes -- you know the routine. I'll need holos of the base, too. Our people will want to have a look at this."

"You'll have them before you leave today," Shana told her as she kicked the landspeeder back into gear.

Alex took one last look at the rising structures before they headed around a curve. A feeling of dread swept over her, and the air suddenly seemed cold --

A vision of a snowy mountainside filled her consciousness. It was a vision she'd had many times, but never in such detail -- two figures, dressed in white, were barely visible against the white backdrop. The wind howled. Snow whipped around their bodies. They rappelled down the side of the mountain, stopping on a ledge that jutted out no more than half a meter.

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blew. Alex felt herself falling backwards, sliding down the face of the mountain. She grasped at the smooth surface of ice. But it yielded nothing to hold on to.

Then, unspoken words penetrated her being -- *calm, be calm*.

Seconds passed. The rope went taut. She was afraid to look up, afraid any movement might jar the rope loose from whatever tenuous grasp had caught it.

Somewhere, above the shrieking wind, she could hear a voice calling her name. "Alex," he said, "take my hand."

"I -- can't!" she cried.

"You can do it," he said.

She gazed up at the figure who called her. Perched perhaps a half meter above her head was a man she'd seen in many dreams -- a man with sandy brown hair and blue eyes. He was leaning down, stretching his hand out to hers. "Take my hand," he said again, his voice almost hypnotic.

Alex slowly moved one arm over her head. With all her might, she stretched her hand over the icy slope until their fingertips met.

She sensed an energy surround her -- it seemed to push her closer to him. He grabbed her hand tightly and pulled her up beside him.

They both stood pressed against the side of the mountain, trying to catch their breath. Every muscle in her body ached, but she gathered strength from the energy that flowed from his presence. It was unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

"You okay?" he asked her.

She nodded her head. "I'm all right --"

The boom of distant thunder brought Alex back. Shana was staring at her, a concerned look on her face.

"Alex, you're shaking! Are you all right?"

She managed to nod as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. She felt so cold, as if she *had* just been on that snowy mountainside. She took several deep breaths and closed her eyes.

Where was that mountain? Why did it dominate her dreams? And who was that man? Why did he seem so familiar to her? *Who are you?*

* * *

"Alex," Magir Paca said, "looks like you've brought some interesting items from Zila." He queried the faces of the leaders of the underground who had gathered in the operations center. "If no one has any objections, let's begin with your report."

"Yes, Alex. Any idea what these modular units are the Empire has delivered to Zila?" Dr. Carl Barzon asked, pointing at the holos they'd passed around the conference table.

"Yes," Desto Mayda asked. "Why this surge of activity around Zila?"

"Just north of the city, the Empire is constructing a major new base. They've housed the units in a storage facility -- here," she said, pointing to the second group of holos that were making their way around the table. "And I hate to say it, gentlemen," Alex told them, "but those modular units look like parts of a v-150 planet defender."

"What?" Mayda bellowed, his cheeks flushing bright red with anger.

Barzon closed his eyes and rubbed a hand across his forehead, not wanting to believe what he'd just heard.

"Dair, can you confirm this?" Paca asked.

"Alex is right about the holos. The units being stored by the Imperials in Zila are parts for KDY v-150s -- heavy ion cannon. But those weapons aren't to defend Zila." He paused, looking at each face in turn. "They'll be set up at the mining center."

There was an audible gasp in the room.

"Heavy ion cannon? Right here in Ariana?" Mayda finally exclaimed.

Dair nodded as his friends tried to digest this information. "I do have one bit of good news," he told them.

"Well, we certainly could use some!" Paca said, hoping to lighten the mood of these people who had worked so hard to bring an end to the Imperial domination of their world.

Hopeful eyes focused on Dair. "They've run into a little problem," he explained. "They've got to wait until a plasma drill is delivered before digging the shaft that houses the reactor."

Well, that was good news, sort of.

"Why are they storing the units in Zila?" Dr. Barzon asked.

"They decided Zila was more isolated. Far removed from the underground activity that has plagued Ariana," Dair told the group.

Mayda was nodding his head slowly, as a smile cracked the face wrinkled less by age than by stress. "And Zila has not seen such activity," he said calmly.

Not yet, Alex thought. She could sense the minds at work. The underground would soon make its presence known in Zila. "New base in Zila, more defenses at the mines -- it sounds as if the Empire is digging in here on Garos," Barzon observed.

"No, I don't think so, Doctor. With the imminent fall of Coruscant, we're hearing a lot of talk at Headquarters," Dair said. "But the general feeling seems to be that the Empire is pumping up security here just long enough to get that ore transported from the mines to their secret research facility."

"So, you think they'll evacuate Garos?" Paca asked.

"If there is any indication that the New Republic is headed this way, I think you'll see a massive pullout of personnel."

"When is delivery expected for this plasma drill?" Mayda asked.

"Nothing definite, but the chatter on the comm seems to indicate we can't expect anything for at least two weeks. There's something going on -- a rendezvous out in the Borderlands," Dair explained.

"A rendezvous?" Paca repeated.

Dair nodded solemnly. As if they hadn't heard enough bad news. "Rumor has it that a Grand Admiral has returned from the Unknown Regions. He's reorganizing the fleet."

"A Grand Admiral? Force be with us!" Mayda exclaimed.

Alex felt shock waves as every mind in the room reacted to this dreadful announcement. Like the others, she was stunned. Rumors of the New Republic's push toward Coruscant had given the freedom fighters of Garos IV hope that help would be on the way. Now another threat darkened their vision of a free Garos. How much longer would their world remain in Imperial hands?

Paca finally spoke. "All right, my friends. I'm afraid we'll have to let the New Republic worry about this Grand Admiral."

"We must concentrate our efforts on the Imperials here," Dr. Barzon agreed.

"Let's assume we have those two weeks before the plasma drill gets delivered," Paca said. "They'll never suspect an attack on that base in Zila."

"Can our operatives there destroy the units in the storage facility?" Mayda asked.

"They're not equipped for a mission like this," Paca said.

"What can we do to help?" Dair asked.

"Desto, make arrangements with our people to begin moving into Zila immediately."

Mayda nodded, making a note on his datapad.

"Alex, when do you visit our friend again?" Paca asked.

"Eight days."

"You can deliver some weapons for our people in Zila. I'll contact our man at the spaceport and have your airspeeder prepped with a few extras."

"All right."

Paca picked up the holos from the table, eyeing them thoughtfully. "I don't think the Empire needs to worry about delivering that plasma drill." He shook his head slowly. "They won't have any ion cannon to put at the mining center anyway."

* * *

Alex sat in the underground ops center in Ariana. She'd wanted to help her comrades in Zila, but Paca was convinced her presence there for the third time in two weeks could arouse suspicion. So, here she was, waiting like everyone else, for news from Zila.

It had been a long afternoon. She glanced at the chrono above the comm intercept stations -- still another half hour before the team was scheduled to penetrate the base.

She closed her eyes to rest for a few minutes. And suddenly, in her mind's eye, she could see a supply skiff pulling up to the Imperial compound in Zila --

"Look, Lieutenant, my orders say to deliver these supplies to the storage facility. Can I just drop them off?" Chance told the officer at the gate.

"I have no record of this shipment."

"With everything that's been coming and going off the mountain, that doesn't surprise me," Chance said, knowing the officer had probably experienced bureaucratic mess-ups before.

"Yes, that's true." He hesitated for a moment. "All right, go ahead."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Chance called as he guided the skiff past the perimeter gate. He took a deep breath and glanced at his chronometer. Just a few more minutes.

He studied the layout of the compound as he proceeded. The underground unit in Zila had provided a detailed map -- hadn't missed a thing as far as he could tell. Observation towers were still under construction, but the garrison itself looked ready to house some of the thousands of military personnel the underground estimated would move in any day. A shuttle platform loomed over the area. *Good*, he thought, *the walker docks are deserted*. There had been no reports of any AT-ATs in the area.

As the skiff moved behind the garrison toward the storage facility on the extreme western end of the compound, Chance tapped on one of the crates. Two men quietly emerged from their hiding place and jumped unnoticed off the skiff. They never looked back.



Chance pulled up to loading dock at the storage facility. He approached the duty officer.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said, handing the man a datacard with forged, though well-documented orders from Imperial authorities in Zila.

"What is this?" the lieutenant asked, pointing toward the skiff.

"Don't know, sir. Some men from Major Rena's office in Zila loaded the crates. I just transported them up here."

The officer studied the information on the datapad. Nothing unusual. Mostly supplies that the Major wanted here when his new office was complete.

"Okay, let's get this stuff unloaded so we can call it quits for today."

"Sounds like a good idea to me, sir," Chance agreed, as the officer waved two technicians over to help unload the skiff.

Suddenly, a violent explosion rocked the garrison.

"What the --" the officer exclaimed.

A split second later, the underground opened fire with blaster rifles and heavy artillery from the hillsides outside the compound.

Chance pulled his blaster, and with only a second's hesitation he shot the two technicians and the shocked duty officer before they had any chance to figure out he wasn't on their side.

Stormtroopers patrolling the grounds reacted quickly. Their heavy blaster rifles were trained on the hillsides. Others scoured the compound trying to identify an enemy that remained unseen. Scout troopers sped outside the compound -- some were caught in a vicious crossfire.

Two more diversionary explosions shook the garrison. Then the unmistakable whoosh of a Plex missile sounded overhead. The shuttle platform wobbled as it was struck. A second missile, then a third, exploded against one of its supports, neatly amputating the leg from the platform. The noise was deafening as the landing platform crashed to the ground.

Chance disregarded all the action around him and got down to business. He tossed a grenade inside the storage facility. Shots rang out from inside the building. He lobbed a second grenade through the open door. Across the compound, an Imperial officer spotted him and fired. A shot blew past his head as he dove inside the building. He rolled behind some neatly stacked containers left undisturbed by his attack. His blaster was ready, but the grenades had silenced all resistance.

Moving quickly around the room, Chance attached charges to a half dozen of the modular units. Two stormtroopers charged through the front entrance of the building just as he completed his task. There were precious few seconds to waste -- those charges were going to blow and he didn't plan on being in the room when they did.

As the troopers moved to encircle him, Chance tossed a grenade toward one, and ran out from cover with his blaster firing at the other one. His bold movements surprised them. Both fell victim to his deadly aim.

Chance jumped over the prone body of one fallen stormtrooper and cautiously peered outside the door. Two speeder bikes were headed straight toward him. He looked closer just to be sure, then smiled to himself. Those weren't scout troopers on the bikes. Those were his comrades!

One bike slowed down. Chance took a flying leap over the loading dock and landed on the supply skiff. He jumped onto the bike behind his comrade. An explosion flared behind them. The first charge blew inside the storage facility.

"Let's get out of here!" he yelled.

The bikes roared through the compound. A steady stream of blaster fire erupted all around them. Laser cannon on both bikes exchanged fire with guards at the gate. One stormtrooper got off a lucky shot. Chance saw his friend's bike explode in a fireball. He targeted the white-armored figure who'd taken out his comrade, and fired. That man would never kill again.



The speeder bike cut through the mountain passes away from the Imperial base. Several brilliant explosions lit the darkening sky behind them --

A buzz brought Alex back to the ops center. She looked around the room, and noticed that Dair Haslip had arrived. He stood behind one of the intercept ops smiling as he read of events transpiring in Zila. Alex grabbed her own headset and listened to the Imperial communications they were monitoring.

Through the static she could hear the report.

"... under attack!" An explosion crackled the comm channel. "...

explosions in the compound. We are ..." More static. "... in the hillsides surrounding the corn..." The comlink went dead.

The freedom fighters in the ops center quietly celebrated this victory. Alex let a slight smile form on her lips. Paca nodded to her from across the room where he sat monitoring the comms.

Alex shifted her gaze back toward one of the display boards. For a few brief seconds she felt a presence surround her, something she was familiar with, yet didn't fully understand. It was an energy so powerful that it filled the room. Then a voice called out, that same voice she'd heard in her dreams.

The Force will be with you ... always.